BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES

DOCTORAL THESIS

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S COMMITMENT TO THE EUROPEAN SECURITY: Debates on the Brexit Process, Strategy and Decisions. Perspectives within the UK, EU and NATO

SUMMARY

Coordinator:
Professor
Valentin Naumescu

PhD Candidate:

Agnes Nicolescu

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SUMMARY

Key words: Brexit, EU, NATO, appraisal theory, perception building, European security, alliance building, balance of threat perception.

The present thesis explores conditions pertaining to the United Kingdom's (UK) commitment to the European security in the context of the Brexit process, launched by the vote of June 2016 expressing voters' decision to leave the European Union institutions. Immediately after the public announcement of the UK's decision to trigger the Brexit process, British and continental researchers started investigating a complex array of variables that may influence the various actors and processes involved in the process.

The thesis analyses perceptions and reflections of the manner in which the process of leaving EU institutions is expected to influence London's future security and defence relationship with the Union, in a difficult and challenging moment not only for Europe but also the transatlantic relationship.

The debate around Brexit is explored through the lens of its commitment to European security as a way of rethinking Great Britain's response to external challenges and threats. British political, military and diplomatic elite have faced continuous uncertainty ever since the pro Brexit vote. This aspect is visible in the official statements as well as in strategic or planning documents.

Scholarly literature has highlighted on many occasions that UK's reluctance towards Common Security and Defence Policy is linked to the fact that the EU is not perceived as a *genuine security actor* **per se**. *The actorness quality on the international relations arena appears as essential for an organisation such as the EU to be able to have a credible voice in international relations*. This feature has been explored extensively in the past decades, and more recently in the Brexit context, also in relation to the EU's capacity to efficiently advance its plans towards building a strong security and defence component. At the same time, the actorness feature has been explored a recent literature dedicated to the relationship between Brexit and European security from the perspective of common areas of interest that the Brits and the Europeans may share in the security and defense area and similar qualities and assets these may have in common. However, empirical testing of the various implications of Brexit for the European security are not yet developed due to the fact that we are talking about an ongoing process. This thesis sets to partially fill in this gap by looking at Central and Eastern European reflections on the topic, as they are so far scarce, with the exception of Polish thinkers.

These common features and assets are explored from the perspective of the **perceptionbuilding theoretical framework**, subscribed to the assumptions of the neorealist-structuralist **balance of threat perception**, proposed by Janice Stein as a response to Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory. The concept of perception – building and its relevance for fully grasping a country's perceptions towards its own security as well as regards other states' security is explored in the thesis using the **appraisal theory**, usually deployed in psychology and other social sciences such as political psychology. The appraisal theory is key to understanding the role of perception - building and the way states or international organisations relate and respond to external challenges.

The **general objectives** of the thesis consist in identifying and exploring the perceptions of major actors involved in Brexit process and variables likely to shape up these perceptions.

The thesis identifies and investigates the characteristics of major institutional actors and structures involved in shaping up the relationship between the UK and the EU, in the area of foreign and security policy in a post - Brexit context.

The research hypothesis is tested through an assessment of the UK's conduct as a foreign and security actor, by using the concepts of actorness and agency, against a set of representative criteria identified by the specialised literature as key to understanding state response to external threats: opportunity, coherence, and effectiveness of action. These factors are analysed from the perspective of neorealist–structuralist framework. According to the hypothesis, **opportunity, coherence,** and **effectiveness of action** have so far shaped up the UK's foreign and security policy conduct and are likely to continue doing so in the future. These components are explored from the perspective of the set of neorealist and reflectivist criteria further on.

The first section highlights these key variables and actors, as they are reflected in the scholarly literature covering the topic. Among other factors, the literature explores the motivations and developments impacting the future EU - UK relationship in the realm of foreign and security policy in the aftermath of Brexit. Focus is laid on understanding the theoretical and conceptual framework according to which any state forms its own distinctive foreign policy and security preferences based on perceptions of threats faced. Dedicated literature also highlights the set of variables which impact **alliance – building** as a practice deployed by any state in response to external challenges and threats. Particular attention is paid

to understanding the role that perceptions play in the formation of a state's foreign and security policy. Numerous researchers have explored and subsequently refined the theoretic and conceptual framework for grasping the transition from the theory of balance of power to the balance of threat. This conceptual transition notes a set of prerequisites which any state deemed as a power must have: geographic position, military and industrial capabilities, population, size of the state, size of defence budget, alliance system, etc.

These variables are explored, measured and tested in the thesis through dedicated literature, in strategy and policy documents and during interviews conducted with members of the academia, former or current diplomatic staff and independent experts.

Variables are explored in the second and third sections of the thesis. They highlight the role of alliance – building and preference formation in an institutional setting such as that of the EU: the role of intergovernmental cooperation in shaping up the future relationship between the UK and the EU in the area of foreign and security policy, and of the European integration process in this realm, as well as historical factors.

Empirical examples of the way in which perceptions shape up foreign and security policy preferences are explored and detailed in the third section, applied to the UK, Germany and France, as well as to Sweden. Sweden has been chosen as an example given its longstanding similarities in terms of foreign and security policy thinking with the UK and its recent commitment to contribute to a more cohesive European voice in this policy area. Sweden is no equal for the UK in terms of military and industrial capabilities and assets, used throughout the thesis as an important variable, as highlighted in the scholarly literature, particularly by neorealist structuralist political thinkers. However, Stockholm's recent commitment to the European security and defence policy provides new perspectives for understanding how the future relationship between the UK and EU in this area may look like.

Furthermore, the future of the UK-US relations are explored, given their special relationship in the foreign and security field, and the UK's occasional role as mediator between the US and the EU, during its EU membership. A specific objective is to understand the stakes of recent European initiatives in the security and defence area, such as PESCO, launched by Germany and France Soon after the 2016 Brexit referendum. With the notable exception of NATO, France and Germany have been instrumental in shaping up all the institutional and strategic decision - making related to the set – up of the EU's evolving political and integration forms: the Euro area, the Schengen area and the associated political processes. This analysis is complemented by comparing the foreign and security policy practices of states known for

sharing UK's foreign and security policy principles. Such an example is Sweden, formerly known as a reluctant Member State in the area of foreign and security policy - making.

The **theoretical framework** of the thesis is based on a balanced mix of neorealiststructuralist arguments, referring to the balance of threat based on perception, and references to the reflectivist approach of states considered as actors on the international arena. The neorealist-structuralist arguments serve as basis for understanding the UK's conduct as a rational actor seeking to maximise its security interests, based on the perceptions of its own role in the Euro - Atlantic security architecture, in the context of Brexit. The neorealiststructuralist approach is also used in alliance building theory. This theoretical construct deploys the balance of threat based on perception conceptualised by Janice Stein as a response to Stephen Walt's of balance of threat.

From a *methodological* standpoint, the researcher deploys **qualitative analysis** instruments such as interviews with foreign policy and security experts, practitioners, former members of the diplomatic corps and journalists regularly covering foreign and security policy topics.

This method has allowed to identify the key common features of the public and expert speech covering the Brexit topic, both in the EU and British public discourse. The reflectivist theoretical framework also analyses the above-mentioned factors (state size, military and industrial capabilities, defence budget, etc), identified as relevant by the neorealist – structuralist literature in order to understand states' perceptions towards their own security and threats faced. The exploration of the same variables across different theoretical perspectives (neorealism vs. reflectivism) enables the researcher to test the validity of the proposed research hypothesis.

The main **research questions** addressed in the thesis are:

1. What are the main topics related to Brexit and European security?

2. What are the major developments and interdependencies in relation to Brexit and European security?

Brexit is mostly explained as the result of an internal **balancing tactic**. The thesis brings an element of freshness to the research of the topic through the empirical deepened analysis of the estimated impact on the European foreign and security policy as perceived in closely connection to the existence of a common definition of threats among the British and EU political elite. From this perspective, the aim of the thesis is to understand some of the internal mechanisms which shape up the way the UK's perceptions towards its own security are formed, and not to give a diagnosis for the Brexit process.

According to the main research hypothesis of the thesis, although the UK's exit from the EU is based on an internal balancing theoretical assumption, seeking to ensure greater autonomy in relation to Brussels, this does not implicitly trigger a definitive disengagement from the European security architecture. This architecture is defined in the thesis as the set of institutions and practices which the UK has influenced ever since joining the Union in 1973. At the same time, dedicated literature and interviews conducted point to the conclusion that London will continue to remain engaged with the European security through its unaltered participation within NATO.

British scepticism towards *European* security is embedded into the national foreign and security political thinking and strategy-making, mostly related to historical considerations. Regardless of these challenging motivations, which have come to be known as efforts to achieve strategic "autonomy" from Europeans, British foreign and security policy decision makers acknowledge the deep common features and interests the UK shares with the remaining Member States in the area of foreign and security policy.

The issue of capability preparedness has become a core concern of the British military and politicals establishment over recent years. This concern can be easily understood in a context of continued underspending and budget cuts which have been impacting the British armed forces over the past decades. The Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy have enabled the Brits to maintain national sovereignty. At the same time, the EU membership status has allowed the Brits to intervene and shape up those policy areas where they and the rest of the Europeans share major interests, European Foreign and Security olicy included.

Section 3 is dedicated to analysing the nuances of the debate about the future balance of power in the EU as a consequence of Brexit has sparked. Furthermore, regional fragmentations on what the future of European security should look like persist and are likely to continue to be strongly linked to the initiatives and overall dynamics of the Franco - German duo. Concerns over the balance of power within the Union in the post - Brexit context dominate the dedicated literature. Difficulties triggered by the contrasting views of the Franco – German tandem on what the EU's security and defence engagements should look like are essentially based on the different strategic cultures of the two key EU Member States and policy shapers. Concerns over Trump's potential renewed presidential mandate in the US, the unfolding Brexit and other overlapping crises such as the looming economic and financial crisis, continued migrant

inflows from Southern Europe and, more recently, the ongoing pandemic complete the complex picture of challenges facing both the EU Members and the UK. The successive enlargement waves of NATO and the EU contributed, on the one hand, to rendering these perspectives more heterogenous. They also put the issue of European leadership at the forefront. At the same time, newcomers from Eastern and Central Europe introduced a sense of urgency about relations with the continent's Eastern partners and the security challenges faced by this region.

UK's membership in NATO remains a core pillar of its national security in the post – Brexit context. At the same time, this raises the issue of opportunity in terms of *alliance building* and further alliance seeking within NATO, a feature subscribed to the neorealist - structuralist theoretical framework.

In the fourth section of the thesis, perceptions on regional security of three Central and Eastern European states are explored in relation to Brexit. The questionnaires conducted on 15 respondents on the UK's behaviour and relationship dynamics with the new Member States highlight gaps and common points in the policy vision on both sides. The three states selected belong to different integration circles within the Euro – Atlantic structures: Romania, Poland and Ukraine.

Section 4 investigates perceptions toward Brexit and security in South Eastern Europe by looking at major security challenges and threats faced by the three countries corresponding to different levels of Euro - Atlantic integration: Poland, Romania and Ukraine. Janice Stein's concepts of **conditional - based threats** and **situational threats** are deployed to showcase with empirical examples from the region the way decision makers, academics and independent experts view Brexit and the future of the European security from the perspective of **Opportunity, Coherence** and **Effectiveness.** The three concepts are used during interviews as tools for exploring the reflections pertaining to these countries' respective foreign and security policy approaches in a post - Brexit context. The theoretical and empirical assumptions used are in line with the neorealist structuralist mindset, centered on the need to understand the complex nexus of alliance – building between like-minded states, military capacity, geographical position, perception of threats and political will variables.

As a conclusion, according to the empirical findings explored in sections 3 and 4, the external challenges faced by both the EU and the UK in recent years represent major determinants for the manner in which they build up their foreign and security policy agendas and shape up responses to external threats. As highlighted in these sections, British and European respondents identify a number of common challenges, including the emergence of assertive actors on the international scene. These actors are perceived as having the capacity to

contest the interests and priorities traditionally pursued by the EU in the foreign and security field. Moreover, these actors, including Russia, are perceived as real challenges to the British and most Europeans' foreign and security policy values and interests. Surveys on the perception of these threats reveal major differences between the views of British experts and practitioners and those of the general public. The latter does not consider Russia's behavior as a risk to national security. On the other hand, British experts view security threats similarly to European experts. These perceptions are not expected to change in the near future, and are specific to the British strategic thinking.

On this basis, it is reasonable to argue that the UK, with a far stronger profile as the security and defence sector in Europe up to this point, is likely to continue to contribute to European security and seek valuable partnerships with the remaining member states, even in a post - Brexit context.

According to opinions expressed during interviews with security and defense experts, concrete opportunities for collaboration between the EU and the UK are expected to depend significantly on the terms under which the Brexit negotiations are conducted and finalised. At the moment of the writing of the thesis, nearly four months before the transition period ends, there is no deal in sight between the two parties.

In terms of *new research perspectives opened up by the thesis*, the following are to be noted:

- Normative dimension of the EU's capacity to act as a global actor in the security area, in a post Brexit context
- Further empirical testing of the set of criteria identified and proposed in the thesis, with focus on the neorealist – structuralist approach of the role of perceptions and correlation to the balance of power and potential consequences of Brexit on this dimension,
- Empirical research on the extent to which perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe towards the current debate on the Brexit process are likely to change in the future.

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